Senseless: Did the perpetrator of the Tuscon massacre have a reason?

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Do people really want to know why, on January 8, 2011, in Tucson, Arizona, a young man named Jared Lee Loughner engaged in mass murder? I submit they do not. Politicians, psychiatrists, pundits, and the press univocally assert that Loughner's deed is the "senseless" product of mental illness. This belief in a non-existing mental disease causing mass murder is on a par with young children's belief in Santa Claus. It is false but satisfies the believers. The great French essayist Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) sagely observed: "Nothing is so firmly believed as what is least known."

Before his shooting spree Loughner had produced a video he called "My Final Thoughts," stating: "All humans are in need of sleep. Jared Loughner is a human. Hence, Jared Loughner is in need of sleep." On the morning of his massacre he posted a message on his MySpace account acknowledging his sense that he was at the end of his rope and his decision to let go: "Goodbye. Dear friends . . . Please don't be mad at me."

"War is a continuation of politics by other means," said Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831). I suggest that, similarly, mass murder in plain sight, such as Loughner committed, is a continuation of suicide by other means. Sometimes it is called "suicide by proxy" or "suicide by cop."

Loughner, to use his metaphor, has gone to sleep. And so have we if we prefer to believe that his self-destructive and destructive act is the senseless product of his "mental illness" rather than the result of his planned, "sensible" decision. The latter view is unpopular and unacceptable because it acknowledges Loughner's humanity and free will, precisely the qualities that psychiatrists – aided and abetted by the criminal justice system – are intent on removing from persons they label "mad." This medicalized view of certain offenses – usually crimes that particularly upset people – has, for reasons I have presented elsewhere, become widely accepted in our society, embraced equally by the right and the left.

Normally, we infer the motive for an action from its consequences. For Loughner, one of the consequences of his action is that his life is over, if not biologically then socially. Loughner was well aware of his failure to transition from childhood to adulthood. After years of fruitless travail, he decided to bring his life to a dramatic end. He committed mass murder and let himself be destroyed by the society that, he felt, obstructed his efforts to succeed.Loughner's crime, like any act, was not senseless at all, provided we are willing to put ourselves in his shoes. Of course, it makes no sense if we are unwilling to do that, denying the personhood of the actor, dismissing a priori his possessing free will, attributing his action to mental disease instead of personal decision.

Crime Is Alleged, Craziness Is Asserted

The only thing we know with certainty about the Loughner case is the identity of the shooter. We

do not know why he committed this crime. Nevertheless, commentators ritually refer to Loughner as the "alleged" assailant and confidently assert that he is a crazy, deranged, lunatic, mentally ill and schizophrenic. Former Vice President Dick Cheney told NBC News: "We need to be a little careful about assuming that somehow the rest of society or the political class bears the responsibility for what happened here when it was the act of a deranged, crazed individual that committed a crime."

E. Fuller Torrey, a recognized expert on schizophrenic murderers, agrees. He refers to Loughner as "the alleged shooter" and states that he "is reported to have had symptoms associated with schizophrenia … and almost certainly was seriously mentally ill and untreated…. These tragedies are the inevitable outcome of five decades of failed mental-health policies." Torrey's remedy for the problem of people being at liberty to commit crimes and suffer the consequences is intensifying the traditional legal-psychiatric practice of incarcerating innocent individuals and calling it "hospitalization" and "treatment" and even "suicide and crime prevention": "The solution to this situation is obvious — make sure individuals with serious mental illnesses are receiving treatment. The mistake was not in emptying the nation's hospitals but rather in ignoring the treatment needs of the patients being released…. Others are unaware they are sick and should be required by law to receive assisted outpatient treatment, including medication and counseling… If they do not comply with the court-ordered treatment plan, they can and should be involuntarily admitted to a hospital."

In contrast, Ashley Figueroa, a former girlfriend of Loughner, told ABC News that she remembers Loughner as "a drug user with a grudge against the government…. I think he's faking
everything…. I think that he has been planning this for some time." A writer for Salon.com adds: "Figueroa is not a doctor, and these claims conflict with the opinion of top doctors in the field of psychiatry. (Dr. E. Fuller Torrey actually told Salon that Loughner looks like a 'textbook' case of paranoid schizophrenia.)"

True, Figueroa is not a "doctor." Do we need to have a medical degree to diagnose a person we have never laid eyes on as schizophrenic? Does the fact that Figueroa knew Loughner, that they had a real-life human relationship, count for nothing?

It did not take long for authorities, in Arizona as well as nationally, to heed Torrey's advice to cure would-be "schizophrenic murderers" by constricting the liberties of all Americans. On January 15, exactly one week after Loughner's rampage, one of his victims, J. Eric Fuller, 63, a military veteran, attended a televised forum on "helping the community to heal" and angrily confronted a fellow participant with the metaphor, "You're dead." Fuller's words were interpreted as a "threat," and he was involuntarily committed for a 72-hour mental-health evaluation. According to CBS News, "[Pima County sheriff's spokesman Jason] Ogan said the hospital will determine when Fuller will be released."

The war on words continued in Congress. Before Tucson, the Republicans opposed Obamacare, calling the bill "job killing." Overnight, that term vanished from the political vocabulary, replaced by "job crushing" and other metaphors. Foolishly, *Washington Post* columnist Dana Milbank hailed this piece of semantic surgery: "[House Speaker John] Boehner, in a pair of

statements on his Web page, dropped the 'job-killing' phrase in favor of 'job-crushing' and 'job-destroying.' House Majority Leader Eric Cantor … did not allow the k-word to escape his lips at Tuesday afternoon's news conference…. [T]he new GOP majority generally showed a skill that had been lacking in the Republican caucus for the past two years: self-restraint."

Wedded to the idea that we have two kinds of lawbreakers in America, sane and insane, we are unable to attend to the human problems we call "mental illnesses." But not to worry, we can always operate on the vocabulary.

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